

Community Centres

Part 1: Changing Design Trends

The local community centre is undoubtedly a vital resource in any municipality. Serving the cultural and recreational needs of the neighbourhood, these facilities foster social interaction, and provide much needed education and counselling services. Probe a little deeper, however, and you will find a building that operates on many levels, fulfilling a range of functions far wider than simply offering recreation amenities. In this, the first of a two-part series, we explore recent trends in community centre design, and illustrate how they affect programmatic and economic operations. In part two, we will highlight another interesting pattern: the merging of the community centre with another community resource – the school. Conversations with municipal representatives from the City of Mississauga provide insight on these current programming and design initiatives, and help explain the implications for future projects.

Meeting the Financial Challenge

Building and operating a recreational community centre may be an onerous financial burden for smaller municipalities. Maintenance requirements, complex amenities such as pools and clear-span multi-purpose spaces, equipment and furnishings can significantly affect the short- and long-term costs. This situation is compounded by the reduction in municipal funding from the provincial governments.

There are, however, new design and management approaches that may help balance this financial load. Many municipalities are now implementing a policy of fiscal accountability for major departments within each centre. In simple terms, this means that each separate function or activity acts as an independent economic entity unto itself. First implemented as a pilot project for the City of Mississauga at Southcommon, this is a relatively new approach. Wayne Hand, Facility Manager for Southcommon, explains that each department is treated as a *business unit*, with revenues projected and tracked, and then netted against operating costs.



While revenues for each component are almost always lower than costs, the fitness and aquatic areas tend to generate the highest revenues, followed by the recreational programs and the library. In smaller municipalities with single centre ownership, the revenue from each activity is usually directed back to that specific activity to help offset the costs as best as possible. In the case of Mississauga, where many centres are operated, revenues are transferred to a single fund for redistribution to cover deficiencies in other centres.

Multi-purpose Opportunities

The biggest challenge, but also the best-case scenario, says Hand, is to achieve a *true multi-purpose phase*, in which totally self-sufficient units can service a variety of different activities within one facility. A large daily-use recreation room for example, can be leased in the evening to banquets or group activities hosting 300-400 people. In this way, the use- and function-potential of the space is maximized, as is the opportunity for revenue. Another method is to form alliances between related recreational and commercial activities. Renting space to a physiotherapy clinic within a fitness-based recreation facility creates obvious

opportunities for revenue generation. Ultimately, this method provides a win-win situation for both the community and the municipality as the marketability of the centre is increased.

Activities on the municipality's wish list may invariably prove more (or perhaps less) desirable when fiscal revenues are compared to costs. The danger is that municipalities may be inclined to favour one activity over another based solely on economic viability, and ignore the needs of the community. Hand cautions that while it is important to provide recreational services in a cost-effective manner, municipalities must understand that the community centre is inherently a non-profit facility.

While the implementation of a strategic business plan is certainly a step forward in centre operations, the way these facilities are designed – in particular the interior plan configuration – is also being rethought. Ultimately, the main planning strategies in a facility of this type are to clarify the internal layout, and provide linkages through the site and into the community.

Centralized Reception

The most salient feature of this new design approach is the integration of a *centralized reception desk*. Earlier examples saw multiple reception/service points servicing each department or activity. This of course, proved highly inefficient in terms of customer service, staffing and security.

By creating a central-square, or service nucleus, users now have the ability to register and pay for several different programs, obtain information and directions, and have easy access to activities, all from one location. Socially, this area can also provide opportunities for leisurely congregation. This experience will be enhanced by the integration of retail-like outlets in the central-square. Says Hand, "The opportunity for one-stop-shopping has dramatically increased user service and satisfaction, and equally helped to streamline our operations."

As at Southcommon, the central-square plan is extremely effective in its ability to generate a functional, well-organized internal plan as well. Individual departments or activities can be arranged in a radial fashion, providing direct visual and physical connections to the main space. In terms of

circulation systems, a pinwheel configuration can be developed whereby several internal corridors radiate outward from the square. This arrangement provides immediate building orientation, simplified wayfinding, increased sight lines, and is coherent in its layout as it arranges and services each department in a clear and efficient manner.

Civic Synergies

Embodying numerous urban principles, this design approach further allows the centre to operate responsibly on a civic level. Connections with key urban elements in the surrounding context, including local streets or squares, housing clusters, public transportation stops, shopping, or other outdoor recreation amenities or facilities are all important considerations.

When asked to comment on recommendations for future projects, Don Mills, City Librarian with Mississauga, spoke highly of the synergies created by these programmatic associations and planing improvements. "By co-locating the library within the community centre," says Mills, "and by sharing resources and common areas, we were able to reduce the library's programmatic requirements by 10%." Mills also suggests that municipalities would be well served by selecting sites with a greater land area to adequately service increases in parking and outdoor amenity needs. One final area of concern for Mills was the unexpected volume of noise during peak times in the library and recreation areas. Sound dampening and separation of noise can, of course, be implemented to address such issues.

If the true measure of a centre's success is its ability to provide maximum use and benefit for its users, have Mississauga's efforts been successful? Given that the lessons learned from Southcommon are currently being incorporated into the design and renovation of several existing and new centres throughout the municipality, it seems the answer is yes. *MW*

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